DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 232 163 CS 207 643

AUTHOR James, Beverly
TITLE The Frankfurt School: Critical Theory as the Negation of Culture.
PUB DATE Aug 83
NOTE 37p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (66th, Corvallis, OR, August 6-9, 1983).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cultural Influences; Industrialization; *Mass Media; Revolution; *Social Change; *Social Theories; *Technological Advancement
IDENTIFIERS *Frankfurt School; Germany

ABSTRACT

In examining the Frankfurt School's critical theory of society in an effort to discover the theoretical basis for the school's inability to merge theory with praxis, this paper points out that the school's analysis of culture in the 1930s and 1940s presents a radical, penetrating critique of the role of mass communication in advanced industrialized Western societies. The first section of the paper provides a discussion of the context in which the school emerged. This is followed by an examination of the school's theory of society, including implied theories of human nature, history, social research, and communication. The last section offers conclusions as to the relationship between aspects of the social theory and the school's ultimate failure to initiate radical social change. (HOD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED232163

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

The Frankfurt School: Critical Theory as the Negation of Culture

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Beverly James

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

by

Beverly James

Presented at the 1983 Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication Convention, Oregon State University, August 6-9.

CS 207 643

The Frankfurt School's analysis of culture in the 1930s and 1940s presents a radical, penetrating critique of the role of mass communication in advanced industrialized Western societies. In tracing the commercialization of culture and the repression of individual consciousness, the School is above all concerned with radical social change in the direction of human emancipation. But in spite of its commitment to revolution, the School is less than successful in translating its theoretical findings into practical activity. The writings of members of the Frankfurt School during that period reveal no positive platforms for action, nor any specific vision for the future. Instead, they exhibit a growing pessimism over the chances for realizing individual freedom in modern mass society. This culminates in a total rejection of positive theory building and an insistance that the only course open for critical theory is the negation of existing repressive cultural conditions.

This paper examines the School's critical theory of society in an effort to discover the theoretical basis for the School's inability to merge theory with praxis. The purpose is to provide a foundation for the development of a

theory of revolutionary action which supercedes the limitations of the Frankfurt School's critical theory. We begin with a brief discussion of the context in which the School emerged. Then, we examine its theory of society, including implied theories of human nature, history, social research, and communication. Finally, we draw conclusions as to the relationship between aspects of the social theory and the School's ultimate failure to initiate radical social change.

Background

The "Frankfurt School" refers to a group of German intellectuals who comprised the inner circle of the Institut fur Sozialforschung in Frankfurt. Max Horkheimer, a philosopher and Kantian scholar who directed the Institute from 1931, served as the group's nucleus. Together with the sociologist and aesthetician, Theodor Adorno, he formulated the School's major theoretical position, which came to be known as the critical theory of society. As Kolakowski writes, these two scholars may be regarded as embodying the Frankfurt School (Kolakowski, 1981: 344). The collaboration of these individuals, which extended over a lifetime, was remarkably fruitful and harmonious. After years of joint intellectual effort in the development of a comprehensive philosophical theory, Horkheimer acknowledged the unanimity

of their thought in these words: "It would be difficult to say which of the ideas originated in his mind and which in my own; our philosophy is one" (Horkheimer, 1947: vii).

A number of other individuals have been closely associated with the Frankfurt School; their academic training and intellectual pursuits give an indication of the breadth of the School's scope: Friedrich Pollock, an economist and one of the School's founders, is known for his early analysis of the Soviet Union's planned economy. Leo Lowenthal, a sociologist of literature, made contributions primarily in the area of popular culture. The psychoanalyst Erich Fromm was instrumental in the Institute's early efforts to incorporate the theories of Marx and Freud into its critical theory of society. Herbert Marcuse, a student of Husserl and Heidegger, became one of the principle architects of critical theory and is known especially for his insights into the political aspects of the technical rationalization of contemporary society. Finally, the literary critic Walter Benjamin was affiliated with the School for a short period of time. Although his mysticism and eccentric interpretation of materialism separated him from the School's mainstream thought, his influence was strong, particularly on Adorno. Taking note of his relationship to the Frankfurt School, Hannah Arendt writes,

"Benjamin probably was the most peculiar Marxist ever produced by this movement, which God knows has had its full share of oddities" (Arendt, 1968: 11).

The Institut fur Sozialforschung itself was established in 1923 through the efforts of Pollock, Horkheimer, and Felix Weil, a political scientist whose family financially underwrote the project. The express purpose of the Institute, as stated by Weil in a memorandum to the curator of Frankfurt University, was to arrive at "knowledge and understanding of social life in its totality" from the theoretical perspective of historical materialism (Slater, 1977: 1). The Institute's first director, Carl Grunberg, made it clear in his inaugural address that the Institute would be guided by Marxist ideology and that its research projects would make use of Marxist methodology (Slater, 1977: 2). However, a number of historical changes separated the Frankfurt School from the climate in which Marx had worked (cf. Jay, 1973: 43), and were to have a profound influence on the development of the School's critical theory of society. In the economic sphere, the shift from liberal, market capitalism to oligopolistic or monopolistic forms of capitalism was well under way in Weimar Germany as in other Western nations. At the same time, an unmistakable trend from laissez-faire economic policies to government

intervention for purposes of economic and social stabilization was occurring. In the realm of ideas, the optimistic belief of Enlightenment philosophy and of German idealism in social progress and the perfectability of mankind was challenged by such thinkers as Nietzsche and Spengler. Freud's insights into the role played by instincts, inner drives, and the unconscious on human behavior cast serious doubts on the notion of the autonomous, rational individual. On the political front, the German working class movement was splintered into two main factions, the Socialist Party (SPD) and the Communist Party (KPD).[1] Neither found favor with the Frankfurt School: the SPD set its hopes on an evolutionary path to socialism through parliamentary democracy, while the KPD was little more than an instrument of Stalin's apparatus. In the meantime, as the Left floundered about impotently, the Right gathered strength. Just two years after Horkheimer took over the reins of the avowedly Marxist Institute, the National Socialists assumed power. In general, then, the Frankfurt School conducted its work in a bleak period of history. Its members witnessed the solid entrenchment of capitalism and its inevitable (so they believed)

---

[1] For a thorough discussion of the Frankfurt School's relationship to German revolutionary movements of the 1920s and 1930s, see Slater, 1977: Chapter 3, "The Historical Materialist Theory-Praxis Nexus."

metamorphosis into Fascism. Hitler's ascendance to power uprooted the predominantly Jewish School from its home and eventually forced it into exile in the United States.

Marxism itself had not gone untouched by the hands of time. With the Soviet Union dubiously providing the only example of the realization of a communist society, Marxist doctrine was ripe for reexamination. Korsch and Lukacs led the attack on orthodox Marxism during the 1920s, emphasizing the Hegelian origin of Marx's dialectic. By the 1930s, charged by the rediscovery of Marx's early philosophical writings, a critical, humanistic interpretation of Marxism had begun to challenge the Soviet Union's positivistic, mechanistic approach and to capture the imagination of intellectuals throughout Eastern and Western Europe.

Two other developments in Marxism were more troublesome. First of all, the integration of the worker into the bourgeois middle-class and the identification of his interests with the capitalist system seriously undermined the fundamental Marxian tenet of the proletariat as a revolutionary class. From the beginning, the Frankfurt School asserted that it is necessary to reconsider the task of a critical theory of society in light of the unlikelihood of its fulfilling its historic function, which had been to provide theoretical leadership for the social strata which

were to bring about the change (Marcuse, 1968: 142). This absence of any historical force capable of embodying revolutionary ideals ultimately led the Frankfurt School to conclude that at the present stage of Western civilization, theory and practice cannot be reconciled (Jay, 1973: 108).

Secondly, the convergence of politics and economics in advanced capitalism eroded the Marxian belief that a social structure's economic base determines its cultural superstructure. As the inadequacy of this model for the analysis of contemporary society became apparent, the Frankfurt School shifted its attention away from such traditional Marxian categories as the division of labor, the class structure, and the labor theory of value and set its focus on the superstructure. Their attempts to understand the disappearance of negative forces in contemporary society took on two major aspects: an examination of psychological obstacles in the path of radical social change, and the critique of culture (Jay, 1973: 84). While still in Europe, the Institute concentrated on the former, initiating its studies of the authoritarian personality and the role of the family in the individual's socialization. In the United States, however, the School encountered authoritarianism in more subtle guises, and turned its gaze on the latter. As Jay writes, "Instead of terror or coercion, more gentle

forms of enforced conformism had been developed" (Jay, 1973: 172). The School of course recognized that mass communication played a leading role in this process. As Adorno put it, "What is called communication nowadays is but the noise that drowns out the silence of the spellbound" (Adorno, 1973b: 348). Thus the School set for itself the task of unraveling the intricacies of mass culture in a mass society.

In the following sections, we focus on the resulting critical theory of society. Intertwined within this social theory are particular notions about the nature of man, the movement of history, the purpose of social research, and the role of communication in society. These various elements of the Frankfurt School's critical theory will be discussed in terms of their contributions to the development of a theory of revolutionary praxis.

Contemporary Society

In spite of the pessimistic tone of the Frankfurt School's work, its overriding concern was always the revolutionary reconstruction of society in the interests of human liberation. Horkheimer makes this clear in the early, programmatic essay "Traditional and Critical Theory" when he states that the goal of critical theory is "man's emancipation from slavery" (Horkheimer, 1972: 246). The

School's analysis of contemporary society is based on the assumption that reason and freedom are natural conditions of mankind. In the same essay, Horkheimer writes, "If activity governed by reason is proper to man, then existent social practice, which forms the individual's life down to its least details, is inhuman, and this inhumanity affects everything that goes on in the society" (Horkheimer, 1972: 210). The task of a critical theory of society, then, is to discover impediments to the rational organization of social life.

Horkheimer and Adorno broached this problem on a grand scale in Dialectic of Enlightenment. Written during the gloomy days of the Second World War, this work sought to discover "why mankind, instead of entering into a truly human condition, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism" (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972: xi). The crux of their argument is that the Enlightenment, rather than liberating mankind from fear and superstition, substituted a new set of myths to replace the old. "Enlightenment," they write, "is mythic fear turned radical" (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972: 16). The reversion of Enlightenment to mythology stems from mankind's attempts to objectify nature. While pre-Enlightenment man tried to influence nature through magic and rituals, Enlightenment man seeks to master it through

positive knowledge. Both historical manifestations of mythology are rooted in mankind's attempt to explain and thus control mysterious forces of nature. Horkheimer and Adorno write, "Man imagines himself free from fear when there is no longer anything unknown" (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972: 16).

This denial of man's dialectical relationship with nature is traced back to the dawn of civilization. Horkheimer writes, "One might say that the collective madness that ranges today, from the concentration camps to the seemingly most harmless mass-culture reactions, was already present in germ in primitive objectivization, in the first man's calculating contemplation of the world as a prey" (Horkheimer, 1947: 176).

This "germ cell of a proliferating mythic irrationality" (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972: 54) multiplied in the hothouse of the Enlightenment, where reason and thought themselves were reduced to instruments. Horkheimer and Adorno state that for Enlightened mankind,

> Ideation is only an instrument. In thought, men distance themselves from nature in order thus imaginatively to present it to themselves -- but only in order to determine how it is to be dominated. Like the thing, the material tool, which is held on to in different situations as the same thing, and hence divides the world as the chaotic, manysided, and disparate from the known, one, and identical, the concept is the ideal tool, fit to do service for everything, wherever it can be applied. (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972: 39)

Mankind's alienation from nature distorts not only the telos of control of nature, but the telos of man's own life: "As soon as man discards his awareness that he himself is nature, all the aims for which he keeps himself alive -- social progress, the intensification of all his material and spiritual powers, even consciousness itself -- are nullified" (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972: 54).

The rationality of Enlightened society is irrational: the more man struggles to establish his sovereignty from nature, the more he becomes dominated by social forces which lord over him as relentlessly and blindly as nature ever did. He conceives of the world as a big analytic puzzle to be solved through a unified positive science. Trapped by the all-important Method, he abandons metaphysics and ultimately extinguishes his own self-consciousness.

The theme of the irrationality of technical rationality was taken up by Marcuse, most notably in his 1964 analysis of advanced industrial society, <u>One-Dimensional Man</u>. He, too, saw "civilizing rationality" as tainted throughout its history by man's denial of his dialectical relationship with nature:

> In the social reality, despite all change, the domination of man by man is still the historical continuum that links pre-technological and technological Reason. However, the society which projects and undertakes the technological transformation of nature alters the base of domination by gradually replacing personal

> dependence (of the slave on the master, the serf on the lord of the manor, the lord on the donor of the fief, etc.) with dependence on the "objective order of things" (on economic laws, the market etc.). (Marcuse, 1964: 144)

By the time Marcuse was writing <u>One-Dimensional Man</u>, the administration of mass society by a technocratic apparatus was highly advanced. The social welfare state had successfully raised the standard of living of the working class, ensuring that social life would remain unfree: "There is no reason to insist on self-determination if the administered life is the comfortable and even the 'good' life" (Marcuse: 1964, 49). The picture painted by Marcuse is one of a society in which two-dimensional, dialectical thought capable of expressing the contradictions of contemporary life has been replaced by technological behavior and "habits of thought" (Marcuse, 1964: 85). The productive apparatus of advanced industrial capitalism demands the rationalization of more and more sectors of social life.

In an essay written in honor of Marcuse's seventieth birthday, Jurgen Habermas explains that Weber's notion of rationalization was adopted by Marcuse to refer not to rationality but to what passes for rationality. In fact, Habermas agrees with Marcuse, the scientific and technical rationalization of society is a form of domination:

> Because this sort of rationality extends to the correct choice among strategies, the appropriate application of technologies, and the efficient establishment of systems (with presupposed aims in given situations), it removes the total social framework of interests in which strategies are chosen, technologies applied, and systems established, from the scope of reflection and rational reconstruction. (Habermas, 1970: 82)

In the name of science, then, the goals of society are removed from the sphere of public discussion and are determined by interests veiled behind the technical apparatus. With the administration of society all but complete and the autonomous individual all but dead, the democratic process itself is rendered invalid.

In its conceptualization of society as marked by the growing domination of man over nature, the Frankfurt School argued that this subjugation of nature culminates in the subjugation of man. As we will see in the next section, the subordination of the individual to "the technical apparatus of production and destruction" (Marcuse, 1964: 166) constitutes a major theme of critical theory.

A Theory of Man

The Frankfurt School's position on the nature of man represents something of a paradox: the impetus behind the whole project of constructing a critical theory of society is an attempt to resurrect the individual, who has been stripped of his identity in mass society. But at the same

time, the School refused to develop any well-defined theory of man. As we will see, its position on this subject is ambivalent and at times contradictory.

With Marx, the Frankfurt School recognized the dialectical nature of the relationship between the individual and society. Horkheimer writes,

> The absolutely isolated individual has always been an illusion. The most esteemed personal qualities, such as independence, will to freedom, sympathy, and the sense of justice, are social as well as individual virtues. The fully developed individual is the consummation of a fully developed society. (Horkheimer, 1947: 135)

Following this, the School denounced the bourgeois liberal era for abstracting the individual from his surroundings. Liberal philosophy, according to Horkheimer, reduces the notion of individualism to the individual's material interests, and characterizes society as a group of self-interested, independent monads interacting in a free market (Horkheimer, 1947: 138-139). The bourgeois individual, Horkheimer writes, "believed . . . himself to be a member of a society that could achieve the highest degree of harmony only through the unrestricted competition of individual interests" (Horkheimer, 1947: 139).

But with the transition from market to corporate, monopoly capitalism, even this economic basis for individual distinction is lost: "The possibility of becoming a subject

in the economy, an entrepreneur or a proprietor, has been completely liquidated," Horkheimer and Adorno write (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972: 153). Today, the individual has little choice but to capitulate to forces he can neither define nor control, and to sink into the anonymous comfort of mass industrial society where "personality scarcely signifies anything more than shining white teeth and freedom from body odor and emotions" (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972: 167).

In spite of this prognosis, the Frankfurt School retained a glimmer of hope. A clue to the source of its guarded optimism is found in Jargon of Authenticity, in which Adorno chastizes the existentialists for plundering the concept of man. The existentialist theme of man's powerlessness and nothingness is indeed close to being realized in contemporary society, Adorno writes. But he accuses the existentialists of transposing this state of affairs into the essence of man, thus affirming and eternalizing a historical condition. According to the existentialist jargon, "suffering, evil, and death are to be accepted, not to be changed." The public is learning to understand its nothingness as Being, he writes (Adorno, 1973a: 65).

The implication of this passage -- that man has at least the potential ability to wrest himself from crippling social conditions -- was never thoroughly grounded in a theory of human nature by the Frankfurt School. With the exception of the humanist Fromm, members of the School agreed that the image of man projected by Marx appears too optimistic and idealistic in the light of present day circumstances. They believed that because Marx failed to foresee the extent of the technological conquest of man and nature, he remained overly sanguine about man's ability to handle the reins of history (Marcuse, 1965: 100-101).

The Frankfurt School flatly denied the existence of any eternal, uniform essence of human nature. In accordance with their understanding of dialectics, members of the School insisted that all individual and social qualities arise through the process of history (Horkheimer, 1972: 66). Yet at times they do ascribe certain inherent characteristics to mankind. They suggest that man has infinite potentialities for development (cf., e.g., Horkheimer, 1972: 66), and with even greater conviction they claim that man has the capacity to direct these potentialities through reason. As Adorno puts it, we cannot lightly cast aside the assertion "that men are more than just members of a species. Their modes of behavior are

mediated through their reason" (Adorno, 1976b: 247). In his 1941 work on the Hegelian roots of the Frankfurt School's concept of reason, Reason and Revolution, Marcuse credits Hegel with first contrasting the employment of reason with an uncritical acquiescence to prevailing social conditions. Interpreting Hegel, Marcuse writes that since the French Revolution, man has sought to organize reality in accordance with the dictates of his rational thinking, instead of simply accepting unquestioningly the existing order and prevailing values. This notion of man as master rather than as victim of his fate implies a particular view of human nature:

> Man is a thinking being. His reason enables him to recognize his own potentialities and those of his world. He is thus not at the mercy of the facts that surround him, but is capable of subjecting them to a higher standard, that of reason. (Marcuse, 1954: 6)

However, Hegel's idealistic reconciliation of antitheses remained in the realm of thought and ideas rather than in reality. The struggle for better living conditions in the world was taken up by the materialists, who concerned themselves less with the philosophical construction of reason in the individual than with the creation of a rational society (Marcuse, 1968: 141-142).

By 1947, when Horkheimer wrote Eclipse of Reason, Frankfurt School members had become quite pessimistic about

the prospects for radical social transformation. In a society marked by technical rationality, they believed, reason itself is altered from a creative power to a mere instrument. Instead of standing in judgment of human actions and ways of life, reason, like thought and language, is degraded to the status of "an executive agency concerned with the how rather than with the what" (Horkheimer, 1947: 55). Now, "to be reasonable means not to be obstinate, which in turn points to conformity with reality as it is" (Horkheimer, 1947: 10).

Closely linked with the notion of the estrangement of man from his own inner nature through his objectification of nature is a particular view of history. In the following section we will discuss the Frankfurt School's theory of history as the process of mankind's increasing control over nature.

Theory of History

Marx's philosophy of history suggests that societies evolve through a dialectical process of conflict and resolution of various forces, most notably through conflict between social classes and between forces of production and relations of production. In the hands of the Frankfurt School, the Marxian philosophy of history is interpreted as stressing the conflict between man and nature as the

dominant motor of history. According to this point of view, human evolution has been marked by the increasing independence of man from nature and the growing mastery of man over natural forces (Fromm, 1962: 35-37). But while Marx held to the optimistic belief that this process would culminate in a truly human society in which free men would rationally plan and carry out their exchange with nature, the Frankfurt School projected a less rosy telos. As Adorno saw it, the Hegelian belief in a unity to history is correct, but he denied that there is inherent progress in the process. Instead, Adorno writes, history is cemented by "the unity of the control of nature, progressing to rule over men, and finally to that over men's inner nature." He adds, "No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb" (Adorno, 1973b: 320).

The despair over any possibility of resolving the conflict between man and nature is pronounced in the Frankfurt School's later writings. In his work in the 1960s, Marcuse argued that changes in the ownership and control of the means of production would no longer suffice to bring about a qualitative change in human existence. What is required instead, he writes vaguely, is "a fundamental change in the direction of technical progress" guided by humanistic values (Marcuse, 1965: 100).

But the Frankfurt School's hopes for the achievement of a rational society were further crippled by a second major feature of its theory of history: an unwillingness to ally itself with any agency potentially capable of implementing the revolutionary reconstruction of society. From the very beginning, the Institute had insisted on autonomy from any political party or organized working class movement, fearing that its intellectual integrity would be compromised. In addition, the School was extremely reluctant to engage in discussions of the historical future. A passage in Adorno's essay on Spengler reveals the perceived dangers:

> Prognosis as such implies manipulation; human spontaneity is abolished. A theory which sees men and their actions as the decisive factor, which no longer thinks in terms of political "power relations" but rather would put an end to the play of such forces, makes no prophecies. Spengler says that it is necessary to calculate the unknown in history as far as possible. But it is precisely the unknown in mankind that cannot be calculated. History is not an equation, an analytic judgment. To think of it this way is to exclude from the very outset the possibility of anything qualitatively different. (Adorno, 1967: 66)

Finally, the abandonment of the notion of the revolutionary proletariat and the substitution of spiritual for material poverty as the basis for repression left the Frankfurt School with no revolutionary agent. There was an attempt to cast the intellectual as the "critical consciousness of society," but as Neumann points out, the

Socratic function of the intellectual is buried in the modern nation-state: with the bureaucratization of society, the intellectual is transformed into a functionary (Neumann, 1953: 11-12). Other members of the School were slightly less cynical and held out hope that individual voices might sporadically rise in protest. Adorno writes, "If a stroke of luck has kept some individuals from adjusting to prevailing norms, it is up to these individuals to make the moral, representative effort to say what the others cannot" (Adorno, 1973b: 41). Still, the duty of the intellectual was confined to giving voice to the truth. As Marcuse describes it, the intellectual's task is "to recall and preserve historical possibilities which seem to have become utopian possibilities . . . in order to open the mental space in which this society can be recognized as what it is and does" (Marcuse, 1976: 301). The implications of this restricted arena of intellectual concerns are brought out in the following section.

Social Research

The philosophical premises and methodological considerations for a critical theory of society are introduced in a couple of essays which appeared in the Zeitschrift fur Sozialforschung in 1937, Marcuse's "Philosophy and Critical Theory," and Horkheimer's "Critical

Theory." At that time, the task of critical theory seemed clear. As Horkheimer puts it, it was to provide the theoretical underpinnings for a revolutionary praxis which will culminate in "a future society as a community of free men" (Horkheimer, 1972: 217). But as noted previously, the School contested Marx's belief that the proletariat could be expected to provide the material force for radical social change. One reason for this was an obvious lack of revolutionary consciousness on the part of the working class. In addition, the School denied Marx's assertion that the proletariat represented a universal interest, and believed that it would be wrong for critical theory to consist of formulations expressing the ideas and feelings of any one particular class (Horkheimer, 1972: 214). In spite of these reservations, however, Horkheimer did suggest that the theoretician and the oppressed class could overcome the tensions which characterize their relationship, and form a dynamic unity which could emerge as a force for social change (Horkheimer, 1972: 215).

The later work of the Frankfurt School presents a shift away from these early expectations for critical theory. While the ultimate project remained the construction of a free society, the approach had to be tempered in light of obstacles presented by the highly rationalized apparatus of

advanced industrial capitalism. Two major theoretical changes resulted. The first was in the Frankfurt School's conceptualization of the relationship between theory and praxis. Over time, the School became more and more convinced that it is incorrect to assume that praxis arises spontaneously from theory. But more importantly, members of the School began to deny the desirability of attempting to translate theory into practical action under unfavorable historical circumstances. Asserting that "The call for unity of theory and practice has irresistibly degraded theory to a servant's role," Adorno explains the position eventually reached by the Frankfurt School vis-a-vis the theory/praxis nexus:

> The liquidation of theory by dogmatization and thought taboos contributed to the bad practice; the recovery of theory's independence lies in the interest of practice itself. The interrelation of both moments is not settled once for all but fluctuates historically. Today, with theory paralyzed and disparaged by the all-governing bustle, its mere existence, however impotent, bears witness against the bustle. (Adorno, 1973b: 143)

Eventually, members of the School denounced political activism and asserted the primacy of theory over practice. In Eclipse of Reason, Horkheimer writes,

> This age needs no added stimulus to action. Philosophy must not be turned into propaganda, even for the best possible purpose. The world has more than enough propaganda. Language is assumed to suggest and intend nothing beyond propaganda. Some readers of this book may think that it

> represents propaganda against propaganda, and conceive each word as a suggestion, slogan, or prescription. Philosophy is not interested in issuing commands. The intellectual situation is so confused that this statement itself may in turn be interpreted as offering foolish advice against obeying any command, even one that might save our lives; indeed, it may even be construed as a command directed against commands. If philosophy is to be put to work, its first task should be to correct this situation. The concentrated energies necessary for reflection must not be prematurely drained into the channels of activistic or nonactivistic programs. (Horkheimer, 1947: 184)

A second change was a shift in emphasis from the ultimate goal of human emancipation to the more immediate goal of negating existing social conditions. It was believed that any premature reconciliation of the contradictions that characterize contemporary society would obliterate the chance for radical reformation. As Adorno explains in his essay "Sociology and Empirical Research," first published in 1957, the antagonistic nature of society is of central importance. Instead of attempting to smooth away tensions and present a harmonious view of society, social research must develop and make fruitful the tensions and contradictions (Adorno, 1976b). As we will see later, critical theory's function of negating the present became particularly fundamental to the Frankfurt School's critique of culture. With individual consciousness becoming more and more repressed in mass society, the only course seemed to be to attempt to disenchant the world and to deny its illusion of harmony.

A final point to be made about the Frankfurt School's social research is that the object of study shifted with changing historical conditions. Returning to his 1937 essay on critical theory, we find Marcuse reaffirming the materialist basis for critical theory, arguing that critical theory is an economic rather than a philosophical system. His claim is that while narrowly-defined economic concepts might not be adequate for the analysis of social systems, the critique of political economy criticizes social existence in its entirety. He writes:

> In a society whose totality was determined by economic relations to the extent that the uncontrolled economy controlled all human relations, even the noneconomic was contained in the economy. It appears that, if and when this control is removed, the rational organization of society toward which critical theory is oriented is more than a new form of economic regulation. (Marcuse, 1968: 144)

Marcuse makes it clear that the object of critical theory is whatever stands in the way of freedom. And while he acknowledges the historical nature of economics as the determining factor of contemporary society, he does assert that for now the labor process determines the general existence of man.

As mentioned above, this early focus on material, economic forces was supplanted in later years by a focus on the cultural superstructure of contemporary society. We

will now look more closely at this phase of the Frankfurt School's critical theory of society.

The Critique of Culture

In its quest to discover the barriers to a radical reconstruction of society, the Frankfurt School met face to face with a thoroughly commercialized culture which had virtually obliterated individual consciousness. From the perspective of critical theory, the individual in mass society is dominated in more subtle yet irresistible ways than ever before: the very core of his being is tightly bound to a repressive social structure whose most powerful weapon is the culture industry.

Members of the School took note of the flourishing business in radio, jazz, movies, and magazines in the liberal industrial nations, and tied the industry's progress to "the general laws of capital" (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972: 132). While the Frankfurt School never undertook any rigorous economic analysis of mass communication, early essays were cast in economic terms. In the 1941 essay "On Popular Music," Adorno ties the production and function of popular music to the present mode of production, which he claims is characterized by rationalized and mechanized labor (Adorno, 1941: 37). He explains popular music as "a way of achieving psychical adjustment to daily life" -- the

laboring masses seek relief from boredom and distraction from reality; the patterned and predigested commercial entertainment provides them with brief escape and induces relaxation without really making any demands on their attention (Adorno, 1941: 37-40).

Similarly, a 1944 essay by Horkheimer and Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," also speaks of the culture industry as an integral part of the economic web of monopoly capitalism. The commercialization of culture has advanced to the state where it no longer even pretends to be art, they write. "The truth that they are just business is made into an ideology in order to justify the rubbish they deliberately produce" (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972: 121). The function of the media is to stunt the consumer's power of imagination and his spontaneity, to mold his mental state so that he identifies with society and loses any awareness of the contradiction between his individuality and his environment (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972: 126-127). "By occupying men's senses from the time they leave the factory in the evening to the time they clock in again the next morning with matter that bears the impress of the labor process they themselves have to sustain throughout the day," the subsumption of culture to administration "mockingly satisfies the concept of a unified

culture which the philosophers of personality contrasted with mass culture" (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972: 131).

According to Horkheimer and Adorno, the culture industry is "the irrefutable prophet of the prevailing order" (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972: 147). It dictates the terms under which man's "merciless life" must be lived and reduces human existence to a parody peopled by laughing monads. But the genuine needs and desires of this jovial audience remain unmet. They write,

> The supreme law is that they must not satify their desires at any price; they must laugh and be content with laughter. In every product of the culture industry, the permanent denial imposed by civilization is once again unmistakably demonstrated and inflicted on its victims. (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972: 141)

This recurring theme of the relationship between the culture industry and the loss of individuality in mass industrial society was counterpointed by a more blatantly political theme, the eradication of culture's revolutionary essence. As Horkheimer puts it, "Great realistic art . . . portrays reality in order to judge it. Modern mass culture . . . glorifies the world as it is" (Horkheimer, 1947: 142).

In "Cultural Criticism and Society," Adorno discusses the critical function of art and the repression of this function in contemporary society. He writes that authentic works of art stand in opposition to the actual life-

processes of society, insisting on autonomy and independence from that material existence, thereby holding out the promise of different conditions in which freedom might be realized (Adorno, 1976a: 261-262). A successful work of art "is not one which resolves objective contradictions in a spurious harmony, but one which expresses the idea of harmony negatively by embodying the contradictions, pure and uncompromised, in its innermost structure" (Adorno, 1976a: 274).

The ability to conceive of a different world through artistic expression seemed all but lost. In "Art and Mass Culture," Horkheimer writes,

> Today it survives only in those works which uncompromisingly express the gulf between the monadic individual and his barbarous surrounding -- prose like Joyce's and paintings like Picasso's Guernica. The grief and horror such works convey are not identical with the feelings of those who, for rational reasons, are turning away from reality or rising against it. The consciousness behind them is rather one cut off from society as it is, and forced into queer, discordant forms. These inhospitable works of art, by remaining loyal to the individual as against the infamy of existence, thus retain the true content of previous great works of art. (Horkheimer, 1972: 278)

In <u>One-Dimensional Man</u>, Marcuse ties the obliteration of the critical function of culture firmly to the economic sphere. He writes that another dimension of reality, once reflected in authentic art, has been liquidated in

contemporary society. Today, the antagonism between culture and social reality is flattened out through the obliteration of oppositional, alien, and trandscendent elements of culture. Mass communication blends art, politics, religion, and philosophy with commercials, reducing these realms to the common denominator of the commodity form. in today's society, the bottom line is exchange value, not use value (Marcuse, 1964: 57).

In the face of culture's present position as an inextricable part of the repressive totality, the Frankfurt School could only imagine one rational approach to the study of mass communication. Just as the only course open to the critical theory of society was negation of the social status quo, so the only course open for critical inquiry into mass communication was negation of the cultural status quo.

Conclusion

The social philosophy developed by Marx, essentially a revolt against inhumane social conditions, embraces certain theories of human nature and of history. In his early, humanistic writings, Marx characterizes man as a being capable of praxis who creates history through the development of his own creative powers. For Marx, the fundamental problem is how to bring about conditions in which man can realize his potential as a being of praxis.

Our analysis of the Frankfurt School reveals an attempt to develop a theory for the Marxist revolutionary project -- the radical reconstruction of society in the interests of human emancipation -- based on a philosophy which denies Marx's theories of man and history. As we have seen, the Frankfurt School failed in this effort. Its early ambitions of merging critical theory with political praxis were gradually abandoned, and in later years the School retreated into a pessimistic denial of the possibility or even the desirability of revolutionary praxis.

At the heart of the School's failure is its undialectical conceptualization of mankind's relationship to nature. As Marx understands this relationship, it is through his interaction with nature, that is, through the process of work, that man meets his material needs, positively transforms his surroundings, and realizes his own creative abilities. In short, under optimal conditions, mankind's interaction with nature becomes the realization of praxis. The Frankfurt School, however, characterizes the relationship as one of man's increasing domination over nature. This one-sided notion ignores positive aspects of mankind's interaction with his environment: if there is a unity from the slingshot to the megaton bomb, so might there be a unity from blood-letting to brain surgery.

But the hands of the Frankfurt School are tied by the lack of a philosophical anthropology and theory of history: not only do members of the School reject Marx's contributions in these areas, they are unwilling to adopt or to construct alternative theories. At best, they suggest that mankind is capable of reason and of praxis, including the shaping of history, under optimal conditions. But their vague abstractions fail to provide any concrete starting points, any criteria for knowledge or wisdom or action, or any vision for the future. Instead, they confine their deeds to condemning the present state of decadence and to pointing out the all-embracing nature of reification in contemporary society.

Turning specifically to the Frankfurt School's approach to social research, including mass communication inquiry, we find its work characterized above all by the theme of negation. This is the result of a couple of factors. First, the School was plagued by an almost hysterical fear that anything positive is apt to degenerate into an affirmation of the existing conditions it seeks to overturn. Secondly, the School was concerned to distance itself from the construction of utopias, and refused to discuss specifics of a future socialist society. It insisted that such a society must be the product of those revolutionary

agents who freely create it, and must reflect their historically-determined needs and interests. As a result, the Frankfurt School's interpretation of a dialectical approach to the study of society places heavy emphasis on the discrepancy between a social institution's "real" conditions and the principles and ideology under which it functions, that is, between what a thing is and what it says it is. Yet members of the School virtually ignore the discrepancy between present historical conditions and optimal possibilities at this stage of social and technological development, between what a thing is and what a thing could be. Thus, they remain locked in the role of gadflies of existing systems.

To be fair to the Frankfurt School, much of its work consists of necessary revisions of Marxism. Its analyses of the commercialization of culture in contemporary society are biting and to the point. Perhaps its major theoretical contribution is the insistence that cultural domination permeates all social strata in industrial society today. But in the final analysis, its pessimistic insistence that critical mass communication inquiry must confine itself to negation is itself an invitation to resignation.

List of References

Adorno, Theodor. 1941. "On Popular Music." Studies in Philosophy and Social Science 9:17-48.

Adorno, Theodor. 1967. Prisms. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Adorno, Theodor. 1969. "Scientific Experiences of a European Scholar in America." In The Intellectual Migration, edited by Donald Fleming and Bernard Bailyn. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Adorno, Theodor. 1973a. The Jargon of Authenticity. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Adorno, Theodor. 1973b. Negative Dialectics. New York: Seabury.

Adorno, Theodor. 1976a. "Cultural Criticism and Society." In Critical Sociology, edited by Paul Connerton. New York: Penguin.

Adorno, Theodor. 1976b. "Sociology and Empirical Research." In Critical Sociology, edited by Paul Connerton.

Arendt, Hannah. 1968. "Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940." Introduction to Illuminations, by Walter Benjamin. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.

Fromm, Erich. 1962. Beyond the Chains of Illusion. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Habermas, Jurgen. 1970. Toward a Rational Society. Boston: Beacon.

Horkheimer, Max. 1947. Eclipse of Reason. New York: Oxford University Press.

Horkheimer, Max. 1972. Critical Theory. New York: Continuum.

Horkheimer, Max and Theodor Adorno. 1972. Dialectic of Enlightenment. New York: Seabury.

Jay, Martin. 1972. "The Frankfurt School's Critique of Marxist Humanism." Social Research 39(2): 285-305.

Jay, Martin. 1973. The Dialectical Imagination. Boston: Little, Brown.

Kolakowski, Leszek. 1981. The Breakdown. Vol. 3 of Main Currents of Marxism. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Marcuse, Herbert. 1954. Reason and Revolution. New York: Humanities.

Marcuse, Herbert. 1964. One-Dimensional Man. Boston: Beacon.

Marcuse, Herbert. 1965. "Socialist Humanism?" In Socialist Humanism, edited by Erich Fromm. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday.

Marcuse, Herbert. 1968. Negations. Boston: Beacon.

Marcuse, Herbert. 1969. An Essay on Liberation. Boston: Beacon.

Marcuse, Herbert. 1976. "Repressive Tolerance." In Critical Sociology, edited by Paul Connerton.

Neumann, Franz L. 1953. "The Social Sciences." In The Cultural Migration, edited by Franz L. Neumann, Henri Peyre, Erwin Panofsky, Wolfgang Kohler, and Paul Tillich. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Slater, Phil. 1977. Origin and Significance of the Frankfurt School. London: Routledge & Keegan Paul.